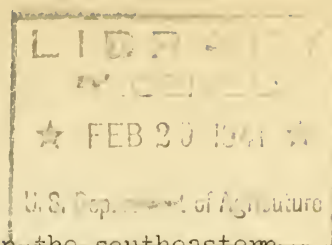


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FLINT RIVER FARMS, GEORGIA



Flint River Farms is a Negro homesteads project in the southeastern part of Macon County, Georgia. Until 1937 its 12,634 acres had been much like that of many other farming areas throughout the South, so far as the agricultural pattern was concerned. Lying in the coastal plain area of south central Georgia, its rich land had been divided into large cotton plantations for more than a hundred years. The plantations were worked first by gangs of Negro slaves and later by sharecroppers, mostly Negroes.

For the men who owned the land, it usually provided good returns. For the men who worked the land, with little hope of rising to ownership, the returns were slim indeed. During the crop season they spent long hours in the fields. Very few of them had a chance to raise a garden, or poultry, or an orchard. Most of their food had to be bought with their low cash earnings which often resulted in malnutrition and poor diets. A bare shelter was all the housing they could expect, and sanitary facilities were few. Medical care was something which they could seldom afford and the death rate was high.

Nor did there seem to be much prospect of better living conditions for these families who worked the land. Instead, things became worse for them after the boll weevil came in 1920. When croppers were not making enough cotton to pay their rent, many landlords put tractors on their fields and hired their same old croppers by the day whenever they needed workhands. Other planters put their land into the growing of vegetables and fruits, especially peaches. Here again dayhands were used to do the work.

These farm families in Macon County were but a few of the many farm families throughout the country in urgent need of help during recent years. Some had been forced off the land and had to depend on what work they could get as day laborers. Others were on the verge of losing their foothold on the land. They needed money for food, feed, equipment, livestock, clothes, building repairs and construction—but no one would lend them money. Moreover, if the assistance was to be of any lasting value, they needed guidance in planning their farm program—advice on how to avoid the risks of a single cash crop, by diversification and by producing at home as much of their needs as possible; how to conserve the fertility of their soil and reclaim what they could of the eroded acreage. In other words, to get a new start toward self-support, these families needed not only money but also instruction in better farming practices.

To help distressed farmers meet these problems is the job of the Farm Security Administration. The agency carries out its program by means of various types of supervised loans. It is also completing a number of homestead projects begun by its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration, and other earlier agencies. One of these projects is Flint River Farms, where 146 Negro farm families are demonstrating new ways for farmer sharecroppers and tenant families to make a better living and become permanently independent.

Founding The New Community

The project was begun in 1937 when the Government bought up several large plantations and subdivided the land into 106 farm units, averaging 93 acres in size. Each of the units is a two-horse farm. In addition to the 77 Negro families living on the land when it was purchased, 29 families from other plantations were accepted to live on the new homesteads.

For most of the units it was necessary to build new barns and new houses. All the land purchased had been operated not as small farms, but as large plantations which usually had one big barn at the main residence. And in most cases it was cheaper to build new houses than to repair the existing tenant houses. Salvaged material was used as far as possible in building poultry houses, smokehouses, hog houses, and shelters. The investment in land and development (not including \$97,500 for the large cooperative farm, which will be discussed later) was \$623,547.09.

All of the houses, modest but substantial, were built by contract, the last contract being for \$1,070 a house. Use of electricity was made possible by REA lines; and bored wells, sanitary privies, and fencing were provided for each unit. Each has a garden and an orchard. To complete the project, the Government built a community center--a group of buildings which includes a six-room school with principal's home, a farm machinery shop, health center, and community hall.

Construction loans were made to 71 Flint River families who are buying their farmsteads from the Government under lease and purchase contracts. Payments are spread over a period of 40 years and the average annual payment of \$178.18 includes taxes, insurance, and payment on construction loan. The remaining families rent their farmsteads from the government under annual leases for from \$75 to \$150 a year, and some of these will later contract for the purchase of their units.

Planning For Better Fanning

At the beginning of 1938 there were 77 houses available on the project. Most of the families who moved into them were day laborers and sharecroppers. Since their average net worth--the value of everything they owned, minus all debts--was only \$78, it was necessary to make each of them, except one, an operating-goods loan, which averaged \$873. With this money they bought cows, hogs, mules, farm implements, some clothes, and most of their groceries until they could start growing their own food. In purchasing these necessities and in making their farm and home plans, each of the families had the advice and guidance of FSA farm and home management supervisors. Their plans stressed the importance of producing food for home use and the improvement of land through the use of cover crops and crop rotation.

Although farming operations were late in getting started, the homesteaders raised cotton, peanuts, corn, and hay for their main crops during 1938. The thousand acres planted to cotton produced 475 bales; 200 tons of peanuts were harvested and sold; and there was an abundance of corn and hay. Each of the families had a vegetable garden 80' x 160' and an orchard. In addition to the fresh food they used, the 77 families canned

about 28,000 quarts of fruits and vegetables, or 363 quarts per family--more and better food than most of them had ever enjoyed before. They also stored away potatoes, syrup, dried peas and butter beans, and dried fruits. When 25 new families were moved onto the project, the old families were able to sell the new ones all the corn they needed for feed for the coming year. Eighty percent of the families produced pork and lard, and they began to make plans for other cash crops, such as pimento peppers, and for raising livestock. The benefits of the "live-at-home" program upon which they were embarking are indicated by the fact that within one year the net worth of these first families increased from \$78 to about \$300.

During 1939 and 1940 additional crops were planted, including oats and wheat. Lespedeza was sown with the oats to make a hay crop after the oats were cut. Each of the families now has a cow, hogs, and chickens for home use, plus some to sell; an orchard, and three acres planted to potatoes and vegetables, from which they can about 500 quarts for winter use. The amount of food raised by these families at Flint River is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that they had done very little gardening before. Most of the family heads had done nothing all their lives but share-crop. Pressure cookers, cover crops, vaccination of cattle, and the inoculation of plant seed--these things were all strange to them. Yet their adjustments have, on the whole, been astonishingly successful.

A Plan For Medical Care

As important in this progress as improved diet is the medical attention which Flint River families receive. Each family had a physical examination before being accepted on the project. In some cases they were accepted even when they had health difficulties, but the physical check-ups were used as a basis to start correction. Everybody got typhoid and smallpox vaccine, and children up to twelve received diphtheria antitoxin. The installation of sanitary pit privies was another step toward health improvement.

Annually each family sets aside a portion of its crop money for a medical fund operated under an arrangement worked out with local doctors. A man and wife pay \$22, and all families of more than two persons pay \$30, no matter how many are in the household. In return they are entitled to physician's care, both office and home service, from any one of four physicians in the county whom they may choose; 15 days hospitalization; and certain drugs and other services. In addition, there is a full-time graduate nurse on the project who works closely with the home supervisor to make good health habits and well balanced meals a part of normal housekeeping for the families. Each week there are clinics where expectant mothers are given advice. Malaria has been reduced considerably, and very few cases have been found on Flint River Farms for the past two seasons. Gradually such major ailments as ruptures, tumors, etc., are being attended to--things that for lack of money had been neglected in the past. All school children receive a thorough examination each year, and immunization against communicable diseases. Services of the clinic are available to people living near Flint River Farms as well as to homesteaders.

Practical Education

The school at Flint River--better than any the county has known for Negroes before--has set new standards. It has vocational training equipment and a good home economics department. Along with their other studies, the boys are taught proper farming methods, stock feeding, poultry care, etc. The girls learn canning, gardening, and cooking. A teacher of vocational agriculture and a home economics teacher were obtained from the State and they have organized evening classes for adults. The county furnished additional teachers, and a house already on the project was repaired for their living quarters. Extension Service people are called on from time to time for technical advice; they also attend evening classes and give talks on special subjects. A Soil Conservation Service unit works out agreements with project farmers on sound farm practices to be followed over a long period of years.

An interesting feature of the work at the farms is being sponsored by the NYA. In the workshop, boys and girls work and learn weaving under the supervision of the home economist and the vocational teacher. The boys have built a machine for treating cotton seed with seresan, and have made poultry brooders and seats for the community house. They cultivate six acres around the school planted in cotton and peanuts, and use the proceeds to buy coal and wood for the school and to pay the electric bills.

The girls weave rugs; make dresses, aprons, and shirts for sale; and make dresses for women on the farms, charging only 20 cents when the material is furnished. They work a garden adjoining the community house, and put up string beans and lima beans for the school lunchroom. They also dry peaches during the peach season. Their rag rugs are sold for 25 cents, and rugs made from bought material for \$1.50. They are also planning on making tufted beadspreads.

The 4-H Club boys have bought purebred hogs, mostly black Poland Chinas, from which it is planned to stock the farms. All during 1940 a mattress center was in operation, using NYA help under the supervision of the Extension Service. The several hundred pupils in the project school have hot lunches every day, prepared from surplus commodities and vegetables canned from the school garden during the summer.

The vocational teachers have shown Flint River families the value of record books and how to use them. Thrift is one thing that is always emphasized. Most of the families had always lived under conditions where they were not able to save anything, and so had never got the habit. One way to teach them thrift has been through the young people, who are given projects of their own, keep cost records, and spend the money themselves. They plan and spend much more carefully when they have worked for their money, than when it is given them.

More has been accomplished in community progress at Flint River Farms than can be measured in dollars and cents. Most of these people had never had much community life before they became a part of the project. After the first few group meetings they began to take an active

part in social and group meetings. In many cases they got together to do their work, and had a good time socially while they were about it. An example is a canning program where the women would meet, can all day, and cook and serve their lunch as the work went on. There have been many picnics with lunches and games; and small group gatherings for doing hand work, such as shuck mats and rag rugs. The development of social and community life brings new understanding and cooperation, and improves the whole community.

A "Training School" for Young Farmers

In addition to the 106 homestead units, the Farm Security Administration is sponsoring a "training farm" at Flint River for young folks. Most of the Flint River families have grown, or almost grown, sons and daughters. Often there are half a dozen grown workers in a single family--entirely too many to be kept busy on a 93-acre farm. These extra people have little chance for work except as hired hands in the nearby peach sheds, asparagus or truck fields. Well over half the time there is nothing at all to do, unless they want to join the army of migrants looking for work among the orchards and vegetable fields of southern Georgia and Florida. An average of seven or eight young couples from the Flint River families are married in the course of a year, and because they lack sufficient assets or training to start out on their own, they usually have been forced back to the same level from which the Farm Security Administration is helping their parents to escape.

The 1940 census showed that the farm population of Georgia counties where the land is level and relatively fertile had remained static or had decreased. Mechanization is revolutionizing farming in these counties, and day labor--often migrant labor--is replacing sharecroppers and small renters. Those who stay on as tenants have an outlook even more uncertain than that which their parents had, and those that move out are most often the young folks who have received some education--the ones with "get up and go." Thus the counties lose the young people who have cost them the most to educate and who would be the best community assets. Most of those who are left on the land are too inexperienced and have had too little training or responsibility, to be good prospects for immediate help through either the Farm Security Administration rehabilitation or tenant purchase program.

Farm Security set out to discover a way to keep these young people on the land to provide them with good farm training and better opportunities. That way has been discovered through the operation of a large-scale farm or plantation by Flint River Farm, Inc., a cooperative association composed of 40 of these young Negro families.

A total of 1,800 acres has been procured for this combination farm and training center. Three residence centers have been located at strategic points. One of the centers provides for twelve families, the others for fourteen each. A tract of three acres has been set aside as the homestead for each family and on each tract there is a five-room house, a smokehouse, a well, sanitary privy, combination barn and chicken house, a chicken yard, a fenced garden large enough to keep a family table supplied with fresh vegetables, and lots for the family

cow and pigs. Water, firewood and use of the community pasture are included in the bargain. Each center is equipped with barns and essential farm machinery. A central office and residence has been provided for the manager, and a community meeting house has been constructed for organized educational and social activities. Necessary land development, including road construction, terracing, drainage and fencing has been completed by the members.

For the purchase of the land, the construction of all buildings, and the land improvements, an investment of only \$3,562 per family has been required. An additional loan averaging about \$900 per family has provided all of the machinery and equipment and 30 head of work-stock, all the operating funds needed, and has stocked the farm with a fine herd of 50 dairy cows, 60 hogs and a few beef cattle and sheep for demonstration purposes.

The entire loan is to be repaid over a period of 40 years, with interest at three percent. The principal payments have been waived during the first three years. This is a modification of the usual repayment terms of a cooperative loan, but it was recommended in this case to avoid throwing too much of the repayment burden upon the families in occupancy during the first few years, while the project is getting into full production. It is expected that the young Negro families selected for this cooperative will leave after three to five years' experience, and it was necessary to put the entire loan on a long-term basis, so those in occupancy through the first few years would not be forced to contribute more than their share toward the liquidation of the loan, as they would if the repayments were scheduled on a short-term basis.

Learning to Work Together

Operations that can best be handled individually are placed on an individual basis; and operations that can be more efficiently carried out on a large scale are handled co-operatively. Thus, each family has its own cow, kept in a community pasture. The units are so planned that the families can produce most of their food in their own kitchen gardens, can their own foods for winter, care for their own cows and chickens, and possibly a pig or two to consume good feed that might otherwise go to waste in the gardens. In this way they are carrying out a live-at-home program through which they are learning to live cheaply and well, and to be largely self-sustaining, even if the price of cotton may be low and the dollar bills scarce. At the same time, the major crops, such as cotton, grain, and peaches, and the dairy, beef and swine herds, which are best adapted to large-scale operations, are handled cooperatively under the guidance of the manager.

The fact that these families are living so well on a land base averaging 45 acres per family is testimony to the tremendous advantage gained through properly planned cooperative operation of the land. Through selection and variation of crops it has been found possible to lower the labor peaks and fill in the low spots, so as to provide more than twice as much labor for the residents than they are able to find when working as harvest hands and day laborers on neighboring plantations.

The cooperative farm, through proper planning of its cotton, peanut, pea, asparagus and peach crops, and with the dairy herd and other livestock, is able to use more than two-thirds of the available work time.

At the same time, because of the coordination between the crop program and the labor supply, enough time is left free for the individuals to take care of their family animals and their own gardens through the growing season. A total of 840 man-days a year are scheduled for this purpose, and some garden work is done every month in the year.

All cooperative work is paid for on a day-wage basis at the prevailing day-wage paid in the county. Checks are issued twice a month. When the crops are sold and a settlement made, money is set aside for repayment of the capital loan, for taxes, insurance, depreciation, etc., with a certain amount retained for the next year's operation. The profit remaining is divided among the working families, with shares determined by the number of days of work each family has contributed during the year.

The good in planning the operation of this plantation is to make it possible for these young families to reach an economic position at the end of not more than five years which will enable them to get established as tenants or owners on individual farms elsewhere. In return for their labor on the plantation, these families receive cash wages and dividends of about \$385 per year; and, in addition to the homestead acreage, each family gets the use of a house with outbuildings, and, in some cases, a brooder house if there is evidence of ability to handle poultry. Each family follows a Farm and Home Management Plan in the operation of its individual homestead unit. Improved pasture for family cows is included in their compensation and each family can buy hogs from the association, as needed, to consume garden produce that would otherwise go to waste. It can also purchase supplemental feeds for the home poultry flock, the family cow, and the pigs. Firewood is available to these families on the farm at no expense other than cutting and hauling. Under average conditions, a family on this plantation should be able, in five year's time, to pay for all of its household furniture and equipment, build up an ample supply of food, and accumulate cash savings of about \$250.

The most important thing which these young families get on this cooperative plantation is practical experience, under trained supervision, in running a typical farm. Not only do they get the actual experience, but they have a chance, through a more formal type of class instruction, to learn the underlying reasons for handling farm operations as they do. This combination of practical and theoretical agricultural training makes for very rapid advancement. For example, each member of the organization serves on budgeting committees for various phases of the operation of the plantation, and thus learn to make sound financial as well as operating plans.

These young families also are learning to handle livestock. Under trained herdsman they acquire a good working knowledge of the proper care of all kinds of livestock. Livestock is essential in any program for rebuilding the agriculture of the South, but disastrous results have occurred in all too many cases where farm families in the cotton-belt have purchased cows, hogs, and chickens before they knew how to take care of them. Such essentials as the growing of a year-round family garden, the handling of machinery, its upkeep and repair; the installation, use and upkeep of household equipment; the proper marketing of produce, the conservation of land and family resources also are taught under circumstances that speed the progress made by these young families toward the goal of farm ownership.

Cooperative Marketing

The operation of both the 106 individual farms and the cooperative plantation has brought up problems of effective buying and marketing. To handle these and other problems, the Flint River Cooperative Association was organized in September, 1940, and a loan was made by FSA for its operation.

The membership in Flint River Farm, Inc., the cooperative plantation, for training the young families, is limited to those who live on this plantation and are regularly employed in its operation. On the other hand, any person 18 years of age or over on the Flint River Project or in the neighborhood who is interested in the purchase or sale of products handled by Flint River Cooperative Association, can become a member of this organization. Practically all of the people living on the 106 individual farms who can qualify are members of the Flint River Cooperative Association. Flint River Farm, Inc., as an organization, has a membership in the Flint River Cooperative Association, and, at the same time, a great many of the young people who live on the cooperative plantation also have individual memberships in Flint River Cooperative Association. The members of Flint River Cooperative Association not only elect their own Board of Directors, but also elect a majority of the Board of Directors of Flint River Farm, Inc. In this way the control over the operation of the cooperative plantation, and the selection and termination of the resident "students," is placed under the control of the entire community.

Through the Flint River Cooperative Association, orders are taken for feed, seed, fertilizer, and similar farm supplies, and deliveries are made direct to the members. A sweet potato curing house is operated to enable the Flint River families to cure and prepare the sweet potato crop for market in the best way. Marketing activities consist of assembling, grading, and otherwise preparing farm products for sale, in accordance with best marketing methods, to assure the members of the best sale prices. Some heavy equipment is owned by the Association for rent to members, thus permitting the use of essential equipment without high individual investment.

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